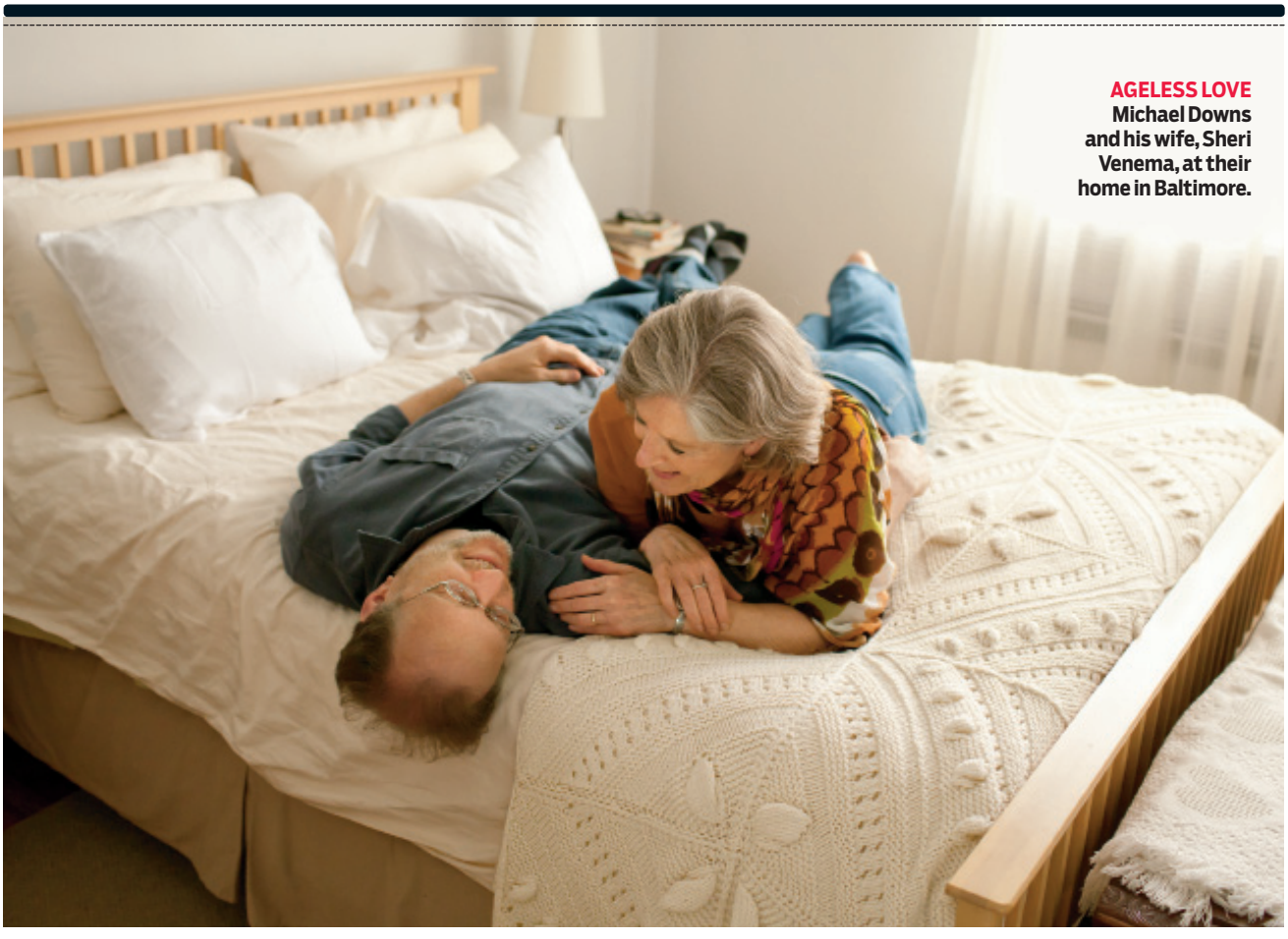

AGELESS LOVE Michael Downs and his wife, Sheri Venema, at their home in Baltimore.

FIRST PERSON

Partners in Time

In his 20s, the author married a woman 17 years older. Now she's looking at retirement and he's wondering, "What age am I again?" BY **MICHAEL DOWNS** PHOTOGRAPH BY **BILL MILES**

THE FIRST OLD MAN I WANTED to be was named Ray, a relative I met only once. Wearing a rakish smile and a driving cap he called his "Go to hell" hat, Ray let a 4-year-old me stick my head through the sunroof of his VW Beetle as we hurtled past Long Island cow pastures. At the house, he rolled me around in his wheelchair, a traveling throne. Old men! Emperors of the universe!

Later I wanted to be my great-uncle Jimmy, who whipped me at checkers, and my 70-something friend Bayard, who taught me to split wood. I saw in old men a way of being that seemed unique to them. They took their time, prized comfort, moved through days as if each were everlasting. I wanted, like them, to read books in a chair shaped to my body, to tilt my Go to Hell hat just so. Had life offered the choice, I'd have skipped pimples and shuffled straight to slippers.

Then came an accident of love. Sheri played volleyball, sipped whiskey, and worked at the same newspaper I did. I suspected she was older. She was—by 17 years. But I hoped our ages (hers 43, mine 26) wouldn't matter. What I valued was how comfortable we felt—the fact of us more than the age of us. Nearly 20 years ago, we married.

But our generational difference did matter. I stopped eating 20-something-guy food. I listened to less Van Halen, more Nina Simone. Mar-

riage became a time machine, speeding me ahead of schedule toward my childhood wish.

If each age has its own personality, mine was split. My driver's license said I was 33, but the AARP card I got through Sheri's membership qualified me for motel discounts. I listened to my sister-in-law and wife reminisce about a long-ago night of flirting with boys—Johnny Mathis on the turntable—when I was still in diapers. Now, at 46, I'm immersed in the details of Sheri's retirement. "How old are you?" has become for me an existential, impossible-to-answer question.

I suspect this disorientation afflicts many boomers like Sheri, who have lived with the idea of their youth so long that old age—whatever that is—seems as strange and gnarly as a new spray of blue veins down your leg. Getting older, as Sheri has taught me, isn't all pipe smoke and quiet dawns. Two years ago she wrenched her shoulder. The tendon has yet to heal, and she can no longer swim laps, once one of her great joys. The other day she forgot how to make her iPod play in the car; frightened, she blamed age. While I'm thinking career, her mind's on mortality. She considers her mother's life span and predicts how much of her own remains. "I've got 20 years left," she tells me. "What do I do with them?"

I don't have an answer, only unease and hope. The unease is the same as Sheri's: that in the end, whenever it comes, we'll fail to bring to bloom what the poet Philip Larkin called "the million-petalled flower/of being here." The hope is that we will.

If we do, I'll try, as I age, to remember how. That's something I do these days—let Sheri's life show me how to accommodate my own later years.

Here's one thing I've learned from this adventure: Love old people if you plan to be one. Another: Sometimes you choose your age; other times it chooses you. Maybe one day I'm young enough to rope-tug with the dog on the living room rug. Then comes the morning when the bathroom mirror shows me my grandfather's eyebrows—unruly, wiry, white. So I pull on a sweater that belonged to him, sit on the porch rocker as my wife waters a potted ivy, and think, "Emperor of the universe!" Every day I practice living as if time is fluid.

My wife and I are dressing for a funeral. "Hon," she says, "where are my reading glasses?"

I find Sheri's glasses and slip them into my coat pocket. At the funeral (for her brother-in-law) I hold the glasses because she doesn't have a pocket. Whoever said "Don't sweat the small stuff" had it backward. The years give you no choice about the big stuff. My body will break down. Sheri will probably die before I do. No matter how much I worry, these things won't change. But at least I can remember Sheri's reading glasses and that we both need to floss and that comfort-able shoes are worth the money.

I still look forward to growing old, to exploring mysteries to come. For now, I'll take them as I did that December night, not long ago, when Sheri and I ice-skated beneath a half-moon. As we circled, I felt myself step-ping in and out of so many ages, they ran together. I was a boy trying to keep his ankles straight, a young lover hold-ing hands, a husband worried about his wife cracking her skull on the ice, an old man lost in shared nostalgia. An hour in, neither of us had fallen. "Twice more around," I said to Sheri, "then let's rest." ■

Michael Downs's novel-in-stories, The Greatest Show, *will be published in 2012. He and his wife, Sheri Venema, write a blog at himplus17.blogspot.com.*

—COURTESY OF MICHAEL DOWNS AND SHERI VENEMA